

ISSUE BRIEF

Workplace Nutrition and Physical Activity:

An overview of the facts, case studies, and information resources

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An epidemic is attacking Americans — claiming 365,000 lives a year.¹ It is the second largest cause of preventable death in America, behind only tobacco use.¹ The killer? Unhealthy eating and physical inactivity.

The health problems resulting from unhealthy eating and physical inactivity are costing the United States economy \$117 billion a year.² In California, the cost of physical inactivity, obesity, and overweight is projected to be as much as \$28 billion in 2005.³ This cost is increasingly borne by California's employers, who see their insurance costs and workers' compensation premiums rise as productivity declines.⁴ Unhealthy workers require more medical care, take more sick days, and are less productive on the job.

As a nation, we spend much more to exacerbate this costly epidemic than to prevent it, by promoting unhealthy foods and creating barriers to physical activity. Some fast food companies spend almost \$650 million a year on advertising, yet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) spends less than \$12 million on programs related to nutrition and physical activity.^{5,6} Urban sprawl prevails over smart growth, which preserves inner cities and open spaces. According to one study, "U.S. adults living in sprawling communities weigh more, [and] are more likely to be obese..."⁷ In the years between 1977 and 1995, adult daily walking trips declined by 40 percent, and the trend continues.⁸

The good news is this epidemic is preventable and does not necessitate expensive drugs or medical treatments. Improving nutrition by eating the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables and





increasing physical activity can help prevent many serious health problems like heart disease, certain types of cancer, type 2 diabetes, and obesity.

HEALTHY EATING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AT WORK

One of the best opportunities Californians have to engage in these behaviors is on the job. Approximately 70 percent of working-age Californians are employed.⁹ Californians spend so many of their waking hours on the job that achieving healthy eating habits and reaching physical activity goals is virtually impossible without addressing these issues at work. Without access to fruits and vegetables on the job, a working adult would have to eat 1 to 2 cups of fruits or vegetables every waking hour after work in order to meet the recommended 3½ to 6½ cups daily.¹⁰ Likewise, in order to manage the 10,000 steps a day recommended by experts, sedentary workers would have to spend most of their evenings in motion.¹¹

WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO

Companies of all sizes and types have implemented employee nutrition and physical activity programs, and many report benefits to employee health and the bottom line. In fact, the World Health Organization reports, “Workplace physical activity programs in the USA can reduce short-term sick leave by 6 to 32 percent, reduce health care costs by 20 to 55 percent, and increase productivity by 2 to 52 percent.”¹²

Despite the benefits of employee wellness programs, there are also significant barriers to implementation, especially in smaller companies and those that employ lower-wage workers. Many of these employers do not offer insurance benefits, so they do not accrue the benefits of lower health care costs that would result from healthier employees. Likewise, they frequently employ a transient workforce, so there is less economic incentive to improve the long-term health of their current workers.¹³ Other employers are reluctant to “interfere,” citing concerns about preserving employee privacy, incurring additional costs for wellness programs, increasing sick time resulting from injury, and — most significantly — increasing liability and insurance costs.¹³

HEALTHY EATING

If working Californians don’t have access to fruits and vegetables on the job, they will need to eat 1 to 2 cups of fruits and vegetables every waking hour after work in order to meet the recommended 3½ to 6½ cups daily.

AT WORK AND HOME



AT HOME



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There are ways to mitigate many of these concerns:

- Employee privacy can be protected by ensuring that programs are designed to offer the entire workforce equal opportunity for good health, rather than targeting individual employees.
- Many worksite activities are cost-neutral and, for those programs that do require an outlay of money or employee time, the net benefits can outweigh the actual costs. There is strong evidence that having fitter employees reduces medical costs.¹⁴ In addition, health care insurers may be willing to partner with employers to promote workplace health initiatives as a cost-saving measure.¹³
- Small business owners have very real concerns that offering physical activity programs on-site will add to their insurance liability. However, there are creative ways to avoid liability issues, including partnerships with fitness facilities, community centers, and other off-site programs.

Employers can take many steps to direct their employees to good nutrition and physical activity, and many are neither expensive nor difficult. While not every business can offer a multi-million dollar gym with stairclimbers or a nutritionally balanced free lunch, most can offer workers healthy options in vending machines, access to walking routes, or time for physical activity breaks.

Provide Healthy Eating Options at Work

Promoting healthy eating can be cost-neutral, incurs no insurance liability, and is easy to implement. One of the most effective ways to encourage employees to make better food choices is to improve access to nutritious foods.¹⁵ Management



can work with outside food vendors, including catering trucks and on-site food services, to ensure that healthy foods are available.

Companies with on-site cafeterias can provide nutrition information for food items and encourage the availability of healthy entrees, salads, and fruits and vegetables. One employer, Maine sporting goods manufacturer L.L. Bean, experimented with encouraging healthy eating by subsidizing healthy foods and funding the subsidy with a premium on high fat foods, such as French fries. After two months, they found a 50 percent increase in the sale of healthy foods and a corresponding 50 percent decrease in the sale of high fat foods.¹⁶

Another no-cost method of contributing to employees' good nutrition is by replacing the junk food in vending machines with healthy snacks. In a study of worksite vending machines, when lowfat

snacks were provided at a 50 percent discount, sales increased 93 percent. Increased sales offset the cost of the discount, and profits remained steady.¹⁷

Companies that provide snacks in the coffee room or for office meetings can offer fruits, vegetables, or other healthy alternatives. Management can make arrangements for on-site farmers' markets or produce trucks. Companies that provide lunchrooms for employees can offer educational materials, such as newsletters, recipes, brochures, and posters

that explain the benefits of eating fruits and vegetables at work.¹⁵

Help Employees Connect With Nutrition Assistance Programs

Nutrition assistance programs, such as food stamps and school meals, are designed to help working families stay healthy and productive. Lower-wage, part-time, or seasonal workers under financial pressure may qualify for food stamps.

School lunches are available to all children, and students from lower income families may qualify for free or reduced price meals. Knowing that their children are receiving nutritious school lunches, breakfasts, after school snacks, and summer meals can provide peace of mind to parents. Employers can provide information about these resources and encourage workers to take advantage of them.

Offer Support for Physical Activity

To support employee physical activity, employers can offer changing space and lockers for those employees who want to exercise at lunch, and provide secure bike racks or locked bike storage. Empty office space can be provided to employees who want to organize their own exercise classes. Even in companies where space is at a premium, stairwells can be unlocked and spruced up so that they offer an inviting place to walk. Employers in unsafe neighborhoods can work with police and community groups to provide safe areas near worksites for employees to walk. Off-site activities can be organized around physical activities; instead of a company happy hour, consider a frisbee tournament, a softball game, or a dancing lesson.

Find Partners

Employers can reduce the budget impact of on-site programs by finding health care plans and industrial health care clinics to share program costs.¹³ Commercial fitness centers and community centers can provide either on-site classes or discounted programs at their own locations. Other partners might be unions and community organizations.

Implement Physical Activity Incentive Programs and Offer Off-site Activities

Tested and research-based incentive programs that offer rewards for on- and off-site healthy behaviors are a low cost way to provide encouragement. Take Action!, a component of the *California 5 a Day — Be Active! Worksite Program's* Fit Business Kit, is one such program that encourages increased physical activity and fruit and vegetable consumption both at work and at home.¹⁸ Agilent Technologies, based in Palo Alto, California, offered a physical activity version of the *Take Action!* program. In ten weeks, 310 employees walked 15,648 miles and lost a total of 471 pounds.¹⁹ Although employers can offer incentives as part of programs like *Take Action!*, the prizes do not have to be big; often the reward is as much in peer recognition and sense of achievement

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as it is in the actual prize. For example, San Bernardino County encourages employees to walk 500 miles and the incentive for finishing the program is a sweatshirt.²⁰

Encourage Walking as Part of Rideshare Programs

Employers reluctant to budget for physical activity programs might be interested in linking walking and biking programs to existing rideshare locations. Earthlink, in Pasadena, California, for instance, offers rebates for bicycle, rollerblade, and walking shoe purchases, and will reimburse 100 percent of the cost of safety inspections and tune ups for bicycles or rollerblades. The firm offers similar incentives for those who bike or walk to the Metro Rail.²¹

Shift Schedules or Extend Lunch Periods to Allow Time for Physical Activity

Time-shifting to create 45-minute lunch periods will give workers 20 minutes to be physically active and 25 minutes to eat. The 15 minutes of extended lunch hour can easily be made up in the morning or evening. Alternatively, allowing workers to start or end their days earlier can enable them to attend outside fitness classes that are otherwise unavailable.

Encourage Physical Activity at Work

If participants agree, one-on-one or 3 to 4 person meetings can take place while walking around the block or inside the building. Employees can be encouraged to take stretch breaks, to use the stairs between floors instead of the elevator, and to walk during their breaks instead of sitting around. Institutionalizing physical activity breaks by creating walking clubs can encourage more employees to participate. In San Bernardino County, 1,600 county employees belong to a breaktime walking club. The club members have reported results such as reductions in stress, weight loss, and increased energy levels.²⁰

WHAT EMPLOYEES CAN DO

Many worksite programs start with employee suggestions and employee volunteers. One dedicated advocate for workplace programs is often enough to get the ball rolling and to convince coworkers and managers to get involved. Employees can ask employers to facilitate worksite physical activity and nutrition programs and should let employers know of the demonstrated cost-benefits to having such programs on-site.

Demand Nutritious Food From Outside Vendors

Food providers will respond to the needs of their market. If enough workers get together to demand that more healthy foods be provided, outside vendors, such as vending machine suppliers, catering truck operators, and on-site food services, will respond to the demand.

Practice Healthy Behaviors at Work

One employee can start a healthy eating movement at work by filling a candy bowl with cherry tomatoes or bringing fruit and vegetable salads to office parties. Similarly, employees can start workout classes during lunch or breaks. Tips on physical activity and nutritious cooking can be posted in common rooms or distributed via e-mail, and employees can buddy up with partners for healthy eating and physical activity encouragement.



Walk or Bike to Work

For those who live close to the worksite, walking or biking to work can actually save time because it combines commute and exercise time. Employees who live farther from worksites might consider walking to and from public transportation or carpool drop-offs. Those who drive may consider parking a few blocks from work and walking the rest of the way.

WHAT COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS CAN DO

Community organizations are an important piece of the puzzle, and they can take an active role in

Community organizations can work with government agencies to provide safe physical activity areas near worksites and to work with employers to accommodate worksite programs.

encouraging local employers to promote workplace programs. Small employers, those without human resources departments or sophisticated wellness programs, stand the most to gain from active partnerships with community organizations.

Partner with Employers to Provide On-site and Localized Nutrition and Physical Activity Programs

Community organizations can inform employers, both large and small, about programs or other support offered in their neighborhoods. Community centers may offer early evening classes or shower and changing facilities. Community organizations can also offer educational materials and even lunchtime speakers to assist in employee nutrition and physical activity programs.

Create and Support Policy Initiatives to Improve Worksite Nutrition and Physical Activity

Community organizations are often well positioned to work with local governments to bring about change. Community organizations can work with government agencies to provide safe physical activity areas near worksites and to work with employers to accommodate worksite programs. On a statewide level, community organizations can work with legislators and legislative staff to bring about policy changes that help promote worksite nutrition and physical activity. One such area is corporate liability. Employer focus groups indicate that if companies had protection from liability for promoting physical activity (similar to “Good Samaritan” laws), they would be more inclined to provide on-site physical activity opportunities.¹⁵ Another area might be establishing food service standards in all public buildings, such that at least 50 percent of food served meets guidelines for healthy food choices. (See www.ca5aday.com/ worksite for examples of nutrition standards.)

CASE STUDIES

Kaiser Permanente Employees Move Together for Wellness²²

Recognizing that obesity is costing Kaiser Permanente \$220 million annually in additional health care costs, Kaiser Permanente of Northern California (KPNC) decided to attack the problem internally, by creating We're Moving Together! This program, implemented in the 12 KPNC health facilities, has three major components: physical activity and weight management; environmental changes to worksite and cafeteria; and safety and injury reduction initiative. Facilities were free to choose one or all of the components. To reinforce the program's emphasis on healthy eating, two of the facilities have begun to organize on-site weekly farmers' markets. Staff have praised the program for increasing their access to fresh produce. The market is open to the whole community, and an ancillary benefit has been widespread community appreciation. Richmond Medical Center has undertaken a stairwell beautification program in order to encourage employees to use the stairs instead of elevators. They have contracted for an artist to create a stairwell mural, which will be painted by employees' children and by children from the community. KPNC is working with outside vendors that run each facility cafeteria to provide lowfat healthy dining alternatives. Although KPNC has no quantitative data yet, anecdotal evidence suggests that the program is increasing employee satisfaction and even aiding in recruitment efforts.

Worksite Wellness LA Reaches Out to Underserved Populations²³

Founded in 1996 as the Worksite Wellness Project, Worksite Wellness LA (WWLA) is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the health status of low-income, medically underserved workers in Los Angeles County. WWLA services worksites in Central Los Angeles, South Los Angeles, and Vernon. Its mission includes helping workers get access to health care and giving them information to improve their overall health.



As part of this mission, WWLA conducts on-site nutrition workshops at small businesses employing low-wage workers. The sessions are conducted in Spanish and are geared to the lower literacy level of many of the workers. Sessions involve a presentation and distribution of flyers and collateral materials, including brochures and cookbooks provided by the *California Nutrition Network*, which encourage fruit and vegetable consumption and physical activity. Currently, WWLA works with approximately 30 businesses, 70 percent of which are garment businesses, while others include food processors, community-based organizations, and even a hotel. In a recent evaluation of employer satisfaction, most employers report being pleased to have had the opportunity to bring WWLA to their worksites. "If the employees are happy, then we are happy because the employees are the company," wrote one participating employer.²⁴



San Bernardino County Employees Make Big Strides to Better Health²⁰

For the past five years, 1,600 San Bernardino County employees have been walking on their breaks as part of the workplace Walking Club. The Walking Club operates in most of the departments and in most geographic areas. The program is incentive based, with rewards at various mileage levels; 52 employees have achieved the ultimate 500-mile mark. Walkers are encouraged to walk every day and to use one full break period per day for their walking. Every worksite location determines the walking course, and each full break walked is considered a mile. Not only does this simplify bookkeeping, but it also encourages each walker to set a pace that is realistic for his or her level of fitness. A coordinator in the Wellness Department spends one to two

hours a week arranging for the distribution of incentives, assisted by 100 site coordinators who spend only a few minutes a week reporting. The full reward package costs \$48 per walker who reaches 500 miles, a cost borne by each walker's individual department. The county, which is self-insured, has had only minor walking-related injuries, and it reports no significant insurance implications. The casual nature of the program has encouraged many nonmembers to go along for the walk, increasing the program's reach. Walkers come from all job classification levels, including hourly and salaried employees. The program continues to grow as additional departments join. A 1999 survey of club members indicated that 83 percent of the participants reported a reduction in stress, 46 percent reported weight loss, and 64 percent reported increased energy levels.

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RESOURCES

American Cancer Society: Active For Life

http://www.cancer.org/docroot/PED/content/PED_1_5X_Active_For_Life.asp

Offers worksite activity programs and information.

America's Walking

www.pbs.org/americaswalking

Features health and fitness advice from walking advocate, Mark Fenton, as well as information on his America's Walking series.

California 5 a Day — for Better Health! Campaign

www.ca5aday.com

Provides information, resources, and tools to increase fruit and vegetable consumption, physical activity, and food security.

California Center for Public Health Advocacy

www.publichealthadvocacy.org

Offers Senate Bill 19/school food standards.

California Food Policy Advocates

www.cfpa.net

Improves the health and well being of low-income Californians by increasing access to nutritious, affordable foods.

California Nutrition Network for Healthy, Active Families

www.ca5aday.com

A network of more than 180 projects and initiatives working together to increase fruit and vegetable consumption, physical activity, and food security.

California Task Force on Youth and Workplace Wellness

www.wellnesstaskforce.org

Creates and promotes policies to decrease the obesity rates in California schools and workplaces.

Institute for Health and Productivity Management

www.ihpm.org

Provides data and services related to all aspects of employee health that affect work performance and costs.

Medstat

www.medstat.com

Provides market information, decision support solutions, and research services to improve policy and management decision-making for employers, government agencies, health plans, hospitals, and provider networks.

National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion

www.cdc.gov/nccdphp

Conducts studies to better understand the causes of chronic diseases, supports programs to promote healthy behaviors, and monitors the health of the nation through surveys.

Produce for Better Health Foundation

www.5aday.com

Provides information, resources, and tools to increase fruit and vegetable consumption.

Shape Up America

www.shapeup.org

Offers information on weight management and increasing physical activity.

The Health Project

<http://healthproject.stanford.edu>

A non-profit private/public consortium that evaluates, promotes, and distributes wellness programs with demonstrated effectiveness in influencing personal health habits and the cost effective use of health care services. Home of the C. Everett Koop National Health Awards.

University of Minnesota, School of Public Health

http://www.ahc.umn.edu/ahc_content/colleges/sph/sph_news/nutrition.pdf

Provides guidelines for offering healthy foods at meetings, seminars, and catering events.

USDA: Food and Nutrition Information Center

www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines

Provides information on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

World Health Organization, Department of Noncommunicable Disease (NCD) Prevention and Health Promotion

www.who.int/hpr

Provides information on the World Health Organization's Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health.



Please visit us at
www.ca5aday.com
or call 1-888-EAT-FIVE.

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